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SPECIAL BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION REPORT STATES -- “WE MUST CHANGE WHAT AND HOW WE TEACH TEACHERS”

BATON ROUGE -- After a year-long study, the Blue Ribbon Commission on Teacher Quality has submitted a list of 60 recommendations targeted at getting more qualified teachers into the classroom, retaining good teachers and improving college teacher education programs.

The Commission presented its report at special May 25 joint meeting of the Louisiana Board of Regents for Higher Education and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. The two boards endorsed the study and directed their staffs to draw up plans for implementing the Commission’s recommendations.

Moments prior to the presentation, Governor Mike Foster urged the two boards to follow up on the Commission’s recommendations. “This is not a vague report,” he said. “I’ll do all I can to work in getting us even with our neighbors in funding education. I’m not satisfied with the way we fund education at any level. My job is to raise that awareness. I have three-and-a-half years left and that’s my goal.”

The commission, formed last year by the Board of Regents and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, is made up of representatives from the governor’s office, Legislature, Regents, BESE, university deans, school district superintendents, school teachers and community representatives from the Council for a Better Louisiana and Teach for America.

Chairing the Blue Ribbon Commission is Frances Henry, a Board of Regents member from Baton Rouge. Co-chairing is BESE president Glenn Lee Buquet of Houma. Coordinating the commission’s work is Jeanne Burns, special projects director in the Governor’s Office of Education.

Commissioner of Higher Education Joseph Savoie said the Commission's report is a "progressive effort" to better train and retain outstanding teachers. "Some recommendations may cause discomfort," he added, "but we must continue to focus on the needs of our children."

Superintendent of Education Cecil J. Picard also endorsed the report. "I commend and heartily endorse the work of the Blue Ribbon Commission," he said. "They have produced a truly excellent set of recommendations and the Department of Education will do its best to work with Regents and higher education to make sure we accomplish these goals."

The two boards adopted a seven-month schedule to plan, implement and report on the progress of teacher education reform activities.

"The most effective way to improve K-12 student achievement," the report states, "is to improve teacher quality." To do so, the Commission set the following goals:

- Focus university and school district partnerships on improved K-12 student achievement and improved teacher quality.
- Actively recruit individuals into the teaching profession and increase the percentage of certified teachers in the state from 87 percent to 94 percent by 2004-2005.
- Set criteria of "quality" teacher preparation programs and have every public and private university meet the criteria by 2004-2005.
- Create environments that support teachers and increase the percentage of teachers retained after the first three years of teaching from 73 percent to 85 percent by 2004-2005.

"It is important to observe as you consider this motion that the Commission's recommendations are an integrated unit," Henry said as she presented the report to the two boards. "One part cannot be considered in isolation of others and all parts are interdependent upon one another. While there may be some occasions for concern by affected individual parties, these concerns must be addressed in the context of the overarching intent of the Commission's recommendations."

Buquet recognized Regents' efforts to improve college teacher education programs. "We can't raise student scores if teachers are not well prepared," she said. "Our efforts are for naught if we don't change teacher education."

The report also listed numerous "specific actions" to help reach the Commission's goals.

Examples include:

- Implement a new streamlined alternate certification system for people who have a college degree and want to enter teaching as a second career.
- Create Teacher Cadet Programs for high school students to introduce them to the teaching profession.
- Change the existing teacher certification requirements and have teachers focus more on academic content, instructional strategies and techniques.
- Implement a teacher preparation accountability system that holds universities accountable for preparing quality teachers.
- Issue report cards about the quality of each university's teacher preparation program.
- Increase teacher salaries.
- Provide teachers a greater pay increase after completing graduate degrees.
- Better prepare principals to create school environments that support teacher development and improved student achievement.
- Provide teacher preparation programs with the necessary infrastructure to prepare teachers to use technology.

A major problem is the retention of new teachers, said Governor Foster's special projects director and Commission coordinator Jeanne Burns. "We're producing teachers," she said. "They become certified but we're losing them. One-third of teachers who become certified don't show up at our public schools. We don't know if they're going out of state or to private schools. We're also losing 11 to 15 percent after the first year of teaching and 27 percent after their fifth year. It's not enough just to produce quality teachers."
